

## Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

# The GreenMan



## “Honey, I shrunk the lawn!”

Nothing is as satisfying as lawn care. Coping with brown patch, powdery mildew, drought, rain and weeds. In return, you enjoy the weekly mowing, noisy machinery, fumes, sweating, raking leaves, watering, and the cost of buying seed and fertilizer. Ah, it's the good life. Haven't you had enough? Maybe instead of just cutting your lawn, you should cut it down to size.

To reduce overall lawn area, first remember that some grassy spots may be desirable for active recreational use. Leave room for your croquet set and badminton court. Any other unused areas, however, are prime candidates for reduction.

The magic word in shrinking lawn area is mulch. Mulch can be used to eliminate grass under trees and shrubs, which will protect them from damage and disease caused by mower and weed trimmers. The mulch can be placed under trees as far out as the end of the dripline: the area under the outermost branches. In addition to conserving moisture, the mulch will also emphasize the shape and natural beauty of these featured specimens.

Mulch can also be used to widen existing planting beds. Rather than having turf run right up to the edge

of foundation plantings, such as azaleas, use a one or two foot wide layer of shredded bark to create a attractive margin between the lawn and shrubs, setting off both visual elements to their best advantage.

Applying mulch effectively, or using it to eliminate turf, requires a very simple trick. Rather than digging out clumps of grass or employing toxic chemicals to kill it, simply smother it.

Use either newspaper or cardboard as a sublayer for the mulch. Flattened old cardboard boxes work well, and will not blow around like newspaper, which needs to be about 20 sheets thick. Either will provide an organic "blanket" to smother grass and weeds, and they will both decompose after several months.

Another option, albeit somewhat more costly, is to use landscape fabric, which is available in rolls ready for use, although you will

probably want to remove or scrape down any grass first, for easier application. On the other hand, it is not advisable to use plastic as a mulch as it prevents necessary air and water from penetrating to plant root zones.

After setting the sublayer in place, start spreading your choice of organic mulch about four to six inches deep. No more grass, weeds, or mowing! Best of all, mulch is free, if



you get it from the county, a local municipality or a tree care company, or generally inexpensive if you prefer a higher grade product, even when delivered in bulk. Above all, mulching is good for the long-term health of all your plants.

Ground covers are the next step in lawn reduction. Although they are a bit more expensive than mulch, they provide an enormous range of aesthetic values for every taste and landscaping situation. In fact, they are far less costly than turf in the long run. Once ground covers are in place, they will generally continue to spread and thrive without any help and with minimum annual maintenance. Try to say that about a lawn.

There are ground covers for sun and shade, dry and wet conditions, and they can fit almost every budget. Moreover, by pairing ground covers with mulch, you can actually save a substantial amount of money and cover a far larger area than you might have imagined possible.

For example, you might not want to have only a large circle of mulch under a favorite crepe myrtle in your front yard. With mulch and sixty dollars, you can underplant a fairly mature tree with white-flowering sweet woodruff. Realize, of course, that your container-grown plants will be spaced about a foot or so apart the first year, but each will quickly fill in to form a solid mass within a couple of years — and they will keep on spreading! Mulch and patience, or at least time, are the secret to a

healthy ground cover economy.

As another example, consider pachysandra, one of the most popular, albeit overused, shade-tolerant ground covers. A flat of some 80 to 100 plants will provide a thick, dense effect covering just under 12 square feet, if planted about four inches apart. However, by setting down a layer of mulch and planting the pachysandra about six inches apart, you will cover a 25 square foot area. Not as lush at first, although the mulch will help visually, but after a year or two, your planting will be every bit as rich looking at less than half the cost.

Another important place to look at eliminating grass is at the front of your property. Rather than having a bleak rectangle of lawn facing the street, why not frame your lawn with either a continuous bed — or series of beds — of evergreen ground covers? The border effect will transform your lawn from the dominant visual element into a less overwhelming component.

In sunny areas, using hardy, drought-resistant ground covers like creeping juniper or carpet cyprus can add a bold new dimension to your landscape. Again, first establish your planting area by setting down cardboard and mulch, and then plant your ground-hugging evergreens. Plants often come in one, two, or three gallon containers, ranging from six to 25 dollars. Larger plants naturally cover an area more quickly, but with time even the smaller one

gallon specimen will achieve a spread of eight to 15 feet. Imagine framing a 10,000 square foot lawn with this sort of a planting. It may take a number of years to fill in, but for about as little as \$500, you can almost cut your lawn area in half.

To this scene, add a few specimen trees, with mulch, several ornamental trees and shrubs like native viburnums, redbud, and serviceberry, also planted in mulch beds, and the odd new planting bed or two with clumping native grasses and wildflowers, and a 10,000 square foot lawn monster can become a pleasant green ribbon easily managed with a push reel mower.

Shrinking your lawn may raise a few neighborhood eyebrows. It may even constitute landscaping heresy to those poor marketing victims who have been brainwashed into thinking that turf is worth any sacrifice of time, money, and resources. But the true measure of your landscaping acumen will come on a hot, hazy Saturday afternoon, as you rest in your shaded hammock, sipping a mimosa, quietly enjoying superior property values, a beautiful setting, and a healthier environment. Now that's the good life!



The GreenMan Show is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be

viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit [www.greenmanshow.com](http://www.greenmanshow.com).

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